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Spy Satellite Problems

DONALDSON: Keeping an eye on the Russian forces, conventional and nuclear, is the important mission of sophisticated U.S. spy-in-the-sky satellites. On Friday another Titan launch vehicle blew up as it attempted to carry such a satellite into orbit.

Our Pentagon correspondent Steve Shepard reports that this problem in launching spy satellites means trouble for U.S. national security.

STEVE SHEPARD: In 135 launches, the Titan missile has failed just three times. But last Friday, for the second time in eight months, a Titan carrying a U.S. spy satellite exploded on launch, and that could profoundly affect U.S. ability to keep an eye on the Russians.

SECY. WEINBERGER: I think it would be less than candid to tell you that it was not a serious loss, in every way.

SHEPARD: Sources say the ill-fated Titan was attempting to orbit a KH-11 reconnaissance satellite, looking something like this. At 50 feet in length, the KH-11 is as big as a boxcar and a lot more important. It is America's principal tool for monitoring Soviet military and economic developments.

JOHN PIKE: We use that to verify arms control agreements, to assess the status of Soviet strategic and conventional forces, monitor troop movements in Europe, and monitor crises in the Third World.

SHEPARD: These commercial satellite photos of missile sites in Libya give some idea of what a satellite can do, although a KH-11 would give much finer detail.

Ideally, the U.S. likes to keep two KH-11s in orbit, the second serving as a backup and check system for the first. At present, there is only one KH-11 in space. If it were to fail, vital Soviet activities would be invisible to the U.S.

Sources say even if the cause of last Friday's Titan accident can be found, there are no other KH-11s in existence to be launched. A new satellite, the KH-12, is so large that only the space shuttle can launch it. And for now, the space shuttle is going nowhere.